



SCRAMBLE Pilots with the Ohio Air Guard's 121st Fighter-Interceptor Wing run for their F-84 thunderjets during an early runway-alert mission.

By Charles J. Gross

Continuing air sovereignty mission began with a secret 1953 experiment that helped shape the Total Force

The Sept. 11 attacks refocused civilian and military officials on the importance of defending the homeland. Displaying a troubling ignorance of the nation's military history, however, some observers asserted that this somehow was a new and unusual challenge to national security.

They were unaware that members of the militia and the National Guard had been performing this mission since colonial times.

But the 9/11 attacks still caught America by surprise. The nation's continental air defense system had been reduced to a fraction of its Cold War size. When the al-Qaeda hijackers struck, 14 armed Air Guard fighters, scattered among seven alert sites nationwide, had sole responsibility for defending U.S. air sovereignty.

That was a far cry from the 2,600 fighter-interceptors defending the United States and Canada from Soviet bombers

in the late 1950s. They focused on detecting and tracking aircraft from overseas. But they, too, were virtually blind to flight activity within the continent and were not prepared to defend the nation from attacks launched from within.

The terrorist attacks revived and altered this historic Air Guard mission.

The continental air defense force structure had been shrinking steadily since the late 1950s due the rise of Soviet ballistic missile capability and intelligence that concluded the bomber threat had been grossly exaggerated.

Following the Cold War's end, the Air Force turned over the last remnants of America's continental air defense system to the Air Guard. Officials thought the Guard was in a better position politically to defend the mission against complaints that it had grown unnecessary after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Moreover they believed air defense was a natural extension of the

FORGOTTEN

PRESENCE

Guard's historic homeland defense mission. Senior Air Guard leaders agreed, believing also that the mission would help preserve part of their large fighter unit force structure.

The Air Guard had been heavily involved in homeland defense since its inception. Following World War II, it was created as primarily a continental air defense force by the U.S. Army Air Forces, which became the U.S. Air Force.

Initially, 72 of the Air National Guard's planned flying squadrons were to be equipped with obsolescent P-47 and P-51 fighters. Such aircraft had provided 70 percent of the Air Force's chronically under-resourced fighter-interceptor force in the late 1940s.

In the event of an international crisis, planners assumed the Air Force would have enough time to mobilize, train and equip the Air Guard units to defend the United States against an air attack.

But poor Air Guard unit operational readiness inspection results and the detonation of a Soviet nuclear device in 1949

tossed those assumptions out the window. Air defense units had to be able to respond immediately to unidentified aircraft approaching the nation's airspace.

The Air Force estimated that it would take more than 86 days to mobilize and prepare an Air Guard fighter unit to execute its continental air defense mission. To Air Force leaders, that meant poorly trained, undermanned and inadequately equipped Air Guard units weren't up to the job.

There was serious talk among Air Force officials in early 1950 of eliminating the Air Guard's combat role altogether. During the Korean War, however, the Air Force re-equipped and retrained several activated Air Guard fighter units to strengthen the Air Defense Command (ADC).

In 1953, volunteers from the 138th Fighter Interceptor Squadron in Syracuse, N.Y., and the 194th Fighter Bomber Squadron in Hayward, Calif., began a secret experiment that reshaped the Air Guard's role in homeland defense and helped lay the foundation of Total Force policy.

Each unit maintained two F-51D fighters and five pilots on five-minute air defense runway alert from one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset. They were a mix of traditional Guardsmen and technicians.

The experiment was the brainchild of Georgia Air Guard Maj. Gen. George G. Finch, former Air Division chief at the National Guard Bureau. He wanted to find an innovative way to provide additional training for fighter pilots after their units were demobilized from the Korean War.

AIR ZERO A Vermont Air Guard F-16 from the 158th Fighter Wing patrols the skies over New York City Sept. 12, 2001.





HISTORICAL DEPICTION The latest Heritage Series print (box below) depicts the beginning of the runway-alert program.

General Finch could be both innovative and difficult. He managed to get both himself and Maj. Gen. Kenneth F. Cramer, Guard Bureau chief, fired in 1950 during a dispute within NGB over who controlled Air Guard policies and programs.

But in 1953, General Finch realized that the overburdened ADC needed help defending the continental United States against the Soviet air threat.

He proposed that a “small number of pilot officers at each strategically placed ANG unit [be placed] on active duty for the purpose of performing air intercept missions” against unidentified aircraft entering the nation’s airspace. They would also provide simulated fighter attacks against the Strategic Air Command’s (SAC) nuclear-capable bombers.

Air Force leaders initially rejected the proposal as impractical and illegal. But Lt. Gen. Benjamin Chidlaw, ADC commander, relented after realizing the Air Force was unable to provide his command with enough active-component resources to meet its growing operational requirements.

Confronted with mounting political pressure to revitalize its reserve programs after the Korean War and its own unwillingness or inability to devote significant additional resources to air defense at SAC’s expense, Air Force leadership finally relented.

Despite continuing Air Force skepticism, the experiment proved to be a great success. The original 120-day test was extended to 169 days. It remained a big secret, however.

Brig. Gen. Curtis J. Irwin, the 138th commander, later recalled trying to obtain the services of his pilots from their civilian employers but not being able to tell them why. All he could provide was a telephone number at the Pentagon.

But Cold War tensions were high and employers were eager to help. Ground crews at both locations were technicians who remained in their civilian status while participating in the experiment.

Facilities and communications were improvised at the Hayward and Syracuse airfields. Air Guardsmen at Syracuse worked out of the main hangar, using a telephone on loan from an Air Force radar site on the other side of Hancock Field to get their missions.

In California, the manager of Hayward’s airport loaned the 194th Fighter Interceptor Squadron a hangar normally used for private aircraft across the runway from the unit’s facilities. The Air Guardsmen were hooked up by telephone to an ADC command post.

Air Guardsmen at both locations conducted periodic scrambles to test their alert capabilities. Most of the time they ran practice intercepts of SAC bombers including B-50s, B-36s and B-47s. Very few of their scrambles were directed against unidentified aircraft. Most turned out to be late or off course commercial airliners.

ADC enthusiastically endorsed the results and the Air Force made the mission permanent in August 1954 after modern fighters and trained personnel became available to some Air Guard units.

On Aug. 15, 1954, eight Air Guard fighter interceptor squadrons began standing alert. Nine more began standing alert Oct. 1, 1954. Each unit gained 10 additional technicians to support its alert requirement and provided two jet fighters and five volunteer aircrews to man their planes 14 hours a day year round.

The duty rotated among all the pilots in each unit. While in alert status, participants were under ADC operational control.

The program expanded rapidly. At its peak in the mid 1950s, all 70 Air Guard fighter squadrons participated.

Most of the units were dual-tasked fighter-bomber organizations with older aircraft that only stood alert during daylight. This structure had to be scaled back to concentrate limited resources on relatively few Guard units that could be equipped with modern interceptors capable of more demanding air defense missions.

By 1961, 25 Air Guard fighter squadrons were participating in ADC’s runway-alert program around the clock.

General Finch had applied the same concept of combining training and support of real-world operations when possible to the Air Force Reserve’s airlift units in the southeastern United States while he commanded 14th Air Force from 1955 to 1957.

The Air Guard’s air defense runway alert experiment in 1953 marked the real beginning of its modern homeland defense role. Moreover, it was the first broad effort to integrate reserve units into a major Air Force combat mission on a continuing basis using volunteers.

It also provided one of the central organizing principles for the Total Force approach to reserve-component training and utilization that was adopted in the 1970s. During the 1990s, it paved the way for the Air Guard to take over First Air Force at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., and provide what remains of the nation’s continental air defense fighter alert forces. ¶

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National Guard Heritage Series

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